DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 244 279 CS 208 314

AUTHOR Nordberg, Beverly
TITLE Let's Not "Write a Report."
PUB DATE Apr 84
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English Spring Conference (3rd, Columbus, OH, April 12-14, 1984).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (120) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Content Area Writing; Higher Education; *Interdisciplinary Approach; Sciences; Secondary Education; Social Studies; *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Research; *Written Language
IDENTIFIERS *Research Papers (Students)

ABSTRACT

In the traditional classroom, written reports assigned to students are generally returned as poorly written, reworded collections of facts taken from single sources. Cross-curriculum writing is a way of circumventing this and encouraging learning and thought development by the student. Writing is usually considered a communication skill, but recent research is establishing a link between the writing process and the use of cognitive skills that aid in thinking, like distinguishing relevant material and arranging data and assertions in patterns. In part, this notion derives from England's Bullock Report, which surveyed student work and isolated two important dimensions of writing--a sense of audience and function. In the United States, the Third National Assessment of Educational Progress found that students were unable to interpret what they read past a superficial level, and had serious problems with various writing tasks. The teaching implications of these findings are varied and wide, and extend from prewriting--or examining a wide variety of resources--to breaking down composition into manageable steps, to selecting a real or imaginary audience to foster confidence. In subject areas like social studies, methods of inquiry can be stressed, while in science, writing as a tool for organizing and evaluating a body of knowledge can be emphasized. (CRH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
X Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED244279

LET'S NOT
"WRITE A REPORT"

by
Beverly Nordberg

Cardinal Stritch College
and The Shorewood Public Schools
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

National Council of Teachers of English
Columbus, Ohio April 12-13, 1984

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Beverly Nordberg
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS208314

"Write a report." Students hear that refrain again and again throughout their school years. From first grade on they repeat the process: reports on dinosaurs and piranhas, on faraway places and notable people, on outer space and inner earth, and everything between! Most children, given such assignments, head for the nearest encyclopedia. They copy down a series of facts, dutifully rewording enough to qualify as having "put it in your own words." Then they finally hand their reports to their teachers with relief.

To tell the truth, teachers don't care much for reports either. Those unwieldy compendia of facts offered in tortured prose have to be corrected and graded. Besides the paperwork problem, teachers ask themselves bothersome but crucial questions. "Shall I look only at content and ignore mistakes in spelling?" "How much of this is the student's own thinking?" "Is this information really necessary?" "Is it pertinent?" "Has this assignment really benefited my students?" Writing assignments, teachers know, should involve thinking rather than merely giving back information. And typically, I fear, conventional reports demand more scouring about than thinking.

In the last few years there has been a new refrain, this one for teachers. "Every teacher a teacher of writing." The

cry has gone out for a stronger emphasis on written language, particularly its thinking aspects instead of the surface characteristics of spelling, grammar and punctuation. Indeed, more and more, teachers see writing as a way of learning itself, and the notion of writing "across the curriculum" has thus spread to all subjects.

Surely there must be a way out of this unimaginative "Write-a-report" dilemma. This paper will consider some aspects of the connection between thinking and writing, and the implications for teaching writing in the content areas--social studies and science, in particular. Specific examples of varied writing activities will be given, with emphasis on avoiding the dreary and finally educationally dubious ritual of report writing. With an expanded repertoire of possibilities, students and teachers can go beyond the old refrain, "Write a report."

Connecting Thinking and Writing

Writing has traditionally been viewed as a communication skill. The view that it is a learning process as well has prompted a growing number of theorists to examine the thinking process involved in composing. The relationship between thought and language has been studied, for example, by Vygotsky, who argues that thought and language are intimately associated. Piaget believed that language is a sign of underlying thought, though he did not give it as prominent a role in cognitive development as Vygotsky does. For both, though, thought and language are constantly interacting with one another.

Writing is a powerful learning instrument available to all instructors. A. D. VanNostrand, Director of the Center for Research in Writing at Brown University, points out that writing is more than grammar, punctuation, and spelling. "Writing," he insists,

> is composing, and composing is a sustained activity of discovering and stating relationships among bits of information. These relationships evolve as you write, by means of your continually grouping pieces of information into clusters, and regrouping them with more information into clusters (178).

This joining of bits of information into relationships makes one aware of the connections, and thus once a piece of writing is completed, its writer knows more than before starting to write. "No matter what the subject, no matter how much you already know about it," VanNostrand adds, "simply writing about that subject will cause you to gain a new awareness of how the fragments of information relate to each other. This awareness is new knowledge."

Written words give an author concrete evidence of the thinking process, says Henry Giroux, in an article about writing and critical thinking in social studies.

> Writing is not a product or a subject, nor is it simply a skill. It is a process that can be used to learn a subject. . . . It allows the writer to produce a graphic record of his or her thinking. As a result the writer has immediate and visible feedback from what he or she has written. Thus the product as well as the process becomes available for review and redefinition (301).

We learn as we write. As we put pen to paper, or sit before a computer screen, we gain new insights into our subject. The writer uses a wide range of cognitive skills: the relevant must be distinguished from the irrelevant, data and assertions

are arranged in a pattern, and relationships are investigated.

In The ABCs of Literacy, Stephen Judy writes:

> I propose that subject teachers see reading and writing not just as tools to apply to the "material" of a course, but as a part of the process of learning the subject itself. Literacy is not something that is used just for homework reading and test writing; it is a part of every class, every experience (100).

In a similar vein, Moffett complains about the most common kinds of writing done in elementary schools: he deplores "the book report on individually read works, and the social studies, geography, or science paper comprised of information pieced together from reference books (254)." Such assignments are a false effort to get children some writing practice. They are hardly writing in any real or intellectually beneficial sense.

Research and Evaluation

Impetus for the writing across the curriculum movement came from England. It arose from the government's Schools Council Development Project of the 1970's. The research team, headed by James Britton, analyzed over two thousand pieces of writing by British students, and then isolated two significant dimensions of writing: "sense of audience" and "function." This research, "The Bullock Report," has been, for the past decade, a most influential document. Several of its recommendations address the issue of developing language across the curriculum.

Britton also described categories or levels of writing tasks. The lowest or easiest tasks are those which involve

personal experience. The more difficult tasks require a writer to abstract ideas from experience, either personal or learned.

In the United States, results from the Third National Assessment for Educational Progress of 1979 indicate that, of more than 100,000 students tested across the country, the vast majority do not develop adequate thinking skills or the ability to interpret what they read beyond a superficial level. The portion of the NAEP tests on Writing Assessment revealed tnat between 10% and 25% of students aged 9, 13, and 17 continue to have serious problems with various kinds of writing tasks: expressive, persuasive, descriptive, or explanatory. In general, across the age levels, "expressive" writing remained about the same or improved slightly, while performance on others declined (NAEP).

A survey on writing for a special issue of the Social Education journal was conducted in 1979, using six hundred subjects in grades 6, 8 and 11. Two writing problems were common among students of social studies. First, they had trouble getting started--that is, picking a subject and thinking about it. Second, they couldn't organize their materials clearly or efficiently. Teachers, too, were surveyed. They said they had problems with teaching writing in social studies: how could they teach writing while teaching content, and how could they find time to teach and evaluate writing of large numbers of students (Beyer, 177)?

Students and teachers in schools beyond the elementary years are the focus of most current research and literature in writing across the curriculum. Very little has been done directly on the use of writing in elementary content fields. Perhaps the shortage of research connecting thinking and writing is a reflection of the difficulties inherent in measuring such elusive areas. Thinking is a "black box" function; it takes place in the world of the mind, and cannot be directly observed. As Judy remarks, about all we can do is observe what goes into the black box, the process, and what comes out, the product.

Speaking of directions for possible future research, Donald Graves asks that research teams be more interdisciplinary, and suggests as one question for investigation: "How does the teacher use writing across the curriculum and in different genre?" Writing, he says, "cannot be contained in the personal narrative alone. Since it exists to clarify meaning, it applies across the curriculum (109)."

Implications for Teaching

So far we have seen the importance of connecting thinking and writing, the need for doing so, and the value of extending into content fields at all levels our awareness of the vital importance of writing. Now let us turn to the practical implications. What kinds of writing activities, other than "report writing," can teachers use to improve student learning?

Pre-writing. A good cook knows how important high quality ingredients are for the success of a recipe. In the elementary classroom we might consider pre-writing activities as the key to a successful recipe for learning. More and more, this first stage is emphasized as the most crucial stage of all those in the writing process. Here the teacher gathers the very best ingredients to offer students, so that their final entre is more than just potluck.

Students need to have at hand a wide variety of resources that go beyond the nearest encyclopedia or textbook. These can include fiction, biography, newspaper clippings, magazines, advertisements, and a wide range of reference works. Non-reading materials are pertinent too: films, tapes, television programs, and outside speakers, as well as personal experience and existing knowledge. With a supply of such ingredients at hand, students won't have to feel, "I don't have anything to say."

Children need to know how to mix the ingredients too. Teachers must teach the reading and writing skills persistently, and in particular content areas. To do this, they must know what knowledge and skills students need to learn, and what patterns and conventions of writing are used by good authors in a field. The central task of writing is to express the relationship between the information and the writer's ideas, not to repeat information itself. Words like describe, compare, tell how, explain, tell why, instead of list, who, what, where, may help.

Students can be involved in their own planning for learning. For example, on index cards, students can pose pre-study questions, questions they'd like answered, or responses to the material. Sometimes writing can do double duty, by using it in place of oral activities. If group discussions are preceded by a brief written response from each student, for instance, everyone will take part, not just the usual outspoken discussion leaders.

Writing. This is the stage of putting pencil to paper, of cementing the fragmentary impressions and thoughts that have been brought out in pre-writing activities. Writing, however, is not only a tool for feeding back information, as we saw earlier. It can itself be a means of learning. As students expand on their ideas, they may come to a more exact understanding of what it is they want to say. Thus it follows that the writing stage is also a fluid time, when changes in original ideas are possible and even desirable.

A new cook doesn't start with a complicated recipe for a Black Forest cake. Neither are young writers experts from the start. Learning and writing must be broken into manageable steps. One must build from a simple, limited and focused task, designed to gather basic information, to more complex activities requiring individual thought. Clear directions are crucial; students must know what to do and how to do it.

Students need an opportunity to select from a wide variety of ways to present material. How about a slide presentation, a play, or a television report? Students can use a personal

narrative form to present ideas and information. Historical novels, diaries, and science fiction use this approach. Writing tasks can be integrated with art, literature, music and drama.

Include group activities as well as those for individual pursuit. The entire class can work on a group project--a good beginning activity to model future assignments. Groups of three or four can brainstorm on a variety of topics; partners can work on a subject of mutual interest; a large group can put out a class newspaper relevant to the subject being studied.

Audience. Specific audiences increase the relevance of work to students. Children can write to someone, real or imaginary, to explain something, to express an opinion, or to persuade. There is a reason for revision when one knows an audience will be reacting. And most young children like to share their work, especially when an aura of confidence exists in the classroom.

As students move into more independence, they can help plan activities and make choices about their work. Long-term and open-ended projects encourage more interested and gifted students.

Finally, students can be involved in evaluating their own learning, both individually and in groups. Student papers are more than just material for correction when we get down to an analysis of how well students and teacher succeeded, and how to build on strengths for the next endeavor.

Social Studies

Social studies, in its broadest sense, examines social relationships and the functioning of society. That's a lot of ground to cover. It includes subjects like history, government, economics, civics, sociology, geography, and anthropology. It is, of course, patently impossible to cover all the knowledge of man's social world. Thus elementary social studies concentrates instead on methods of inquiry, and on the issues which have meaning in students' lives.

Most programs in social studies emphasize that to understand others, children must first understand themselves and how they relate to other people. "Who am I?" "How am I like and different from other people?" In the early years of primary school, students center on their immediate environment. Families and neighborhoods are important. Later they move outward to groups. "What is a group?" "What is my role in the groups in which I take part?" Later stages in this expanding consciousness of the world are the community, the nation and other countries, and history and culture.

Children need to develop a variety of skills if they are to fit well into this social world. These are skills for locating, gathering, interpreting, and applying social studies information. There is general agreement as to the nature of these abilities, based on data gathered from children's texts, and from the "Curriculum Guidelines of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS Task Force)."

Students will be able to:

Use context and picture clues
Listen and recall facts and concepts
Order events in sequence
Define words and concepts
Observe and record accurately
Discern cause and effect
Distinguish fact from opinion
Recognize attitudes
Compare and contrast
Evaluate evidence
Classify, arrange in categories
Interpret graphs, charts and maps
Make generalizations, using specifics
Organize and synthesize data
Predict and hypothesize

Writing to learn content and thinking skills has enormous potential for social studies, Giroux believes. Not only does such writing help to teach students some of the fundamental relationships between writing and thinking, it also helps them learn social studies content by increasing their ability to think interpretively and critically about such content (190-93).

There are numerous activities that will promote the thinking-writing connection in social studies, activities suggested by the skills given above. Many of them also apply to other content learning, including science. A few examples can set the stage for further exploration.

1. Without using a resource, students write a definition for a word such as family or freedom. Definitions are discussed and compared, then checked against usage in text. Finally, students look in several dictionaries and compare.

2. Students take notes from a text, by writing a short phrase or sentence for every paragraph. Try taking notes from films, speakers, or other sources; compare.

3. On a long roll of paper make a time line, using pictures, captions, short summaries of events, newspaper stories, or personal reminiscences. These can relate to events and people of the time studied.

4. Make a list of the qualities that make a good friend, a leader, or a good climate. Rank from most important to least important, individually or in groups.

5. As a class or in groups, make up a test covering what has just been studied. Some question types that can be used are: sentence with word omitted; true-false questions; matching lists; multiple-choice questions; essay questions. Try "grading" them.

6. Use a project approach to follow a topic of interest over an extended period. It should be more than a conscientiously-copied report of factual information, and can include newspaper clippings, pictures, interviews, charts, drawings, and so on.

7. Write soliloquies of people in reverse situations: a teacher and a student; a wheat farmer and a girl in a city eating a whole-wheat sandwich.

Science

The cry has been loud and clear. We need to build the writing skills of students. In science there is a further complication: fewer and fewer students are becoming interested in science. Though the relationship between writing and science learning has not been precisely documented by research, it is evident that both need more time and attention in classrooms.

Piaget's third stage of intellectual development, that of concrete operations, happens about the ages of six to eleven--the average ages of children from grades one through six. At this stage students bring together the concrete and the abstraction of language. What better place than science classes, ask Jacobson and Bergman in Science for Children?

> Children should be encouraged and helped to verbalize about the material objects and operations they carry out with them. Activity and language need to be brought together. In fact, it may be that a wide range of concrete operations is essential for future verbal development; it apparently is essential if the child is to move into the fourth stage of intellectual development (26).

The professional scientist communicates the results of investigations through scientific journals and at science meetings. So should children have chances to discuss their investigations with their peers, and test their ideas in public discussion.

Reading and writing are central to science, reports Judy. The use of language cannot be separated from scientific inquiry. A scientist of any age will

> employ language, not just to label specimens or phenomena, but to understand them, and he or she will use language creatively, expressively, yet tentatively to offer hypotheses to the outside world and to see confirmation or refutation (271).

Despite the apparent relevancy of writing to the learning of science, very little attention is paid to it in teacher's manuals of science texts used by their students. A random selection of science texts was reviewed. Most emphasize a discovery or inquiry approach, with greater emphasis upon the digestion and retention of larger concepts instead of masses of facts. Suggestions for writing activities, however, are almost non-existent, even at the level of record keeping and accurate observation.

Science is described in a two-fold dimension: (1) content or knowledge, and (2) the methods used to organize and evaluate that content. Science is usually taken as a study of the physical world, including living things and energy, or matter. The scientist's approach is experimental and objective. He is

> mainly interested in describing, classifying, analyzing, and attempting to explain the phenomena he observes. . . . He derives hypotheses to be tested in carefully controlled experimental situations (Smith, Goodman and Meredith, 159).

From these generalizations he looks for relationships, which may guide future search. This is, in essence, the scientific method.

In the search for meaning through investigation of the material world, the development of inquiry and process skills are essential. The following are representative.

The student will be able to:

Gather information and evidence

Measure and record accurately

Describe phenomena

Recognize cause and effect

Classify objects and information

Compare and contrast

Construct or draw a model

Hypothesize and predict

Use trial and error for testing

Realize significance of change, adaptation

Recognize environmental factors

Use evidence to draw conclusions

With skills such as these in mind, how can we use writing to help children learn? Here are a few suggestions.

1. Keep records: of clouds as they change during the day, how fast a shadow moves, someone's hand and body language, time-on-task at school (as a randomly-set timer goes off). Notice and keep a record of different language used in various situations: reporting the same incident to a teacher, to a friend, to parents.

2. Keep a record for a day of all the times electricity is used. Write a story about it. Then try another utility.

3. Brainstorm in small groups. How are plants and animals alike? How different? Compare data and classify it. Compare an animal or insect with a human, noting similarities and differences. This could then be the basis for a story.

4. Look carefully at a picture, then describe what your five senses would tell you if you were in that picture. Use the same technique for real places: the school yard, the cafeteria, the nurse's office. Write a description.

5. Draw and explain a model to solve a problem, such as how to get rid of a big city's garbage, how to teach everyone to read, how to help people lose weight. Make up a theory to explain what happens to the tooth fairy's collection of teeth, why dogs and cats fight, why dinosaurs became extinct.

6. Keep a diary as if you were a blackbird, a chipmunk, or a daffodil. Use factual information in the daily record.

Evaluation

Evaluation, the final stage of instruction, gives teachers a chance to step back and take a look at what happened, and to consider what they will do next. What went well? What didn't? Tomorrow's lessons need to be planned so that students will continue to learn. What students know--and don't know--should be the basis for that planning.

It is no secret that many teachers of writing are apprehensive about how to "handle the paper load." But when we look at writing as a learning process, we can see that the neatly written paper with precise margins is not what counts. Many of the activities given earlier may well cut down on the paperwork burden, by yielding papers that don't need correction: brainstorming, recording, comparing, taking notes, writing pre-discussion and test questions. Other activities, especially those that are more complex or lengthy, will be developed in stages. Thus students will receive feedback on their work as it progresses, and the final product will be superior in every respect, better for students and for teachers.

Teachers who break new ground teaching writing in content

fields may well expect times of failure as well as success. They can take heart from the comment of Donald Graves, who points out that teachers know more about their own students than researchers. What they know--and learn-- can be the most important key to the writing-thinking connection.

Bibliography

Britton, James. The development of writing abilities 11-18). London: Macmillan Education, 1975.

Beyer, Barry K. Writing to learn in social studies. Social Education, March 1979, 43, 176-177.

Giroux, Henry A. Teaching content and thinking through writing. Social Education, March 1979, 43, 190-193.

_____. Writing and critical thinking in the social studies. Curriculum Inquiry, Winter 1978, 301.

Graves, Donald H. Balance the basics: let them write. New York: The Ford Foundation, 1978.

_____. Where have all the teachers gone? Language Arts, April 1981, 58, 492-497.

Judy, Stephen N. The ABCs of literacy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

Martin, Nancy et al. Writing and learning across the curriculum. London: Ward Lock Educational, 1976.

National Assessment of Educational Progress. Writing achievement, 1969-79: results from the third national writing assessment. Report No. 10-W-35. Denver: NAEP, 1980.

Smith, E. Brooks, Kenneth S. Goodman, Robert Meredith. Language and thinking in school (2nd ed.). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976.

Van Nostrand, A.D. Writing and the generation of knowledge, Social Education, March 1979, 43, 180-181.